

## **Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* and Dostoevsky's Dystopian Foresight**

Dostoevsky had a clear idea of the philosophical background of utopian socialism and predicted its political consequences in *Devils* (*Besy*, 1871–72), also translated as *The Possessed*. The novel is based on his knowledge of Saint-Simon, Fourier, and Cabet, as well as Russian materialist philosophers such as Chernyshevsky and Pisarev; and, in particular, on documentation about the radical activities of Sergei Nechayev. In Dostoevsky's fictional reconstruction of the political debate of the 1860s, one of the main characters, the conservative Stepan Trofimovich Verkhovensky, tries to understand his radical son Peter by reading Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat?*?, 1863). Verkhovensky considers this novel a catechism of the radical movement and wants to know it in order to be able to counter its pernicious influence. We, too, if we wish to understand the background of Dostoevsky's repudiation of nihilist politics, cannot circumvent *What Is to Be Done?* It is an early expression of philosophical materialism and explores its ideological consequences, which were totally rejected by Dostoevsky.

### *Utopian rationality in What Is to Be Done?*

Chernyshevsky is a pivotal but much neglected figure in the history of pre-revolutionary Russia. Neither a great thinker nor a gifted writer, his crucial role has been easily overlooked. Yet, Joseph Frank was probably correct in observing that no work in modern literature, with the possible exception of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, can compete with *What Is to Be Done?* in its historical effect. As Frank writes, "far more than Marx's *Capital*," Chernyshevsky's novel, with the telling subtitle "From stories about the new people" ("Iz rasskazov o novykh lyudyakh"), "supplied the emotional dynamic that eventually went to make the Russian Revolution" (quoted by Katz and Wagner 1989: 1). Among all leftist criticism of Russian politics and culture it is primarily Chernyshevsky's utopian novel that added the particular momentum to the Russian revolutionary movement.

That Dostoevsky in his fiction has numerous references to Chernyshevsky, and none to Marx, confirms Frank's judgment.

Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) grew up in Saratov, a provincial town on the middle Volga, where his father was a priest in the Orthodox Church and where he attended the theological seminary in Saratov between 1842 and 1846. When he was eighteen years old he moved to the University of St. Petersburg, where he stayed for five years during which he discovered French utopian socialism, notably the work of Charles Fourier and his follower, Victor Considérant, as well as Feuerbach's materialist critique of religion. The combination of utopian socialism and atheistic materialism in Chernyshevsky's work convinced Dostoevsky that socialism was inherently atheistic. Since his dissertation on the materialist interpretation of art was not well received, Chernyshevsky could not pursue a scholarly career and turned to journalism instead, publishing mainly in *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), to which Turgenev also contributed. The latter despised Chernyshevsky's rigorous materialism, arguing that he arrogantly strove to wipe poetry off the face of the earth and wished to replace it by his "coarse seminarian principles" (Katz and Wagner 1989: 13).

It is not unexpected to see a link between the Orthodox education of Chernyshevsky and his fanatic defense of ascetic materialism. Many radicals who came to embrace atheism had a similar background, the literary critic N. A. Dobrolyubov being among them – not to mention a certain Joseph Stalin. Berdyayev has suggested that an almost logical connection exists between nihilism and the Orthodox belief. Nihilism is supposed to have grown on the spiritual soil of Orthodoxy and "could appear only in a soul which was cast in an Orthodox mould." He argued that "at the base of Russian Nihilism ... lies the Orthodox rejection of the world ..., the acknowledgement of the sinfulness of all riches and luxury, of all creative profusion in art and thought" (quoted in Frank 1976–2002: vol. 2, 245n). Berdyayev's view of nihilism applies also to the related but less radical ideology of materialist determinism propounded by Chernyshevsky. The many examples of religious phraseology used to characterize the protagonists in *What Is to Be Done?* support Berdyayev's analysis.

In the early 1860s Chernyshevsky was writing more and more on political affairs and social theory. Since the abolition of serfdom in 1861 did not reduce the rift between moderate and radical intelligentsia, the debate became increasingly fervid. Though Chernyshevsky tried to remain within the boundaries of tsarist censorship, he was accused of being connected with student protests in 1862 and was arrested in July of that year. While

imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, he wrote his last major work, the utopian novel *What Is to Be Done*. As Katz and Wagner record, in 1864 Chernyshevsky was convicted of subversion, largely on the basis of false evidence, and sentenced to fourteen years of hard labor in Siberia (Katz and Wagner 1989: 14–15). The many years in prison and exile broke his health and mental resilience. Only during the last years of his life was he allowed to settle in Astrakhan, together with his wife. In the meantime he had grown into a martyr of the radical movement, and this undoubtedly enhanced the popularity of his novel.

Except for the last pages of *What Is to Be Done?*, where a woman in black appears who is reminiscent of a sad and sorrowful Olga Sokratova, Chernyshevsky's wife, the tone of the novel is far from tragic. On the contrary, it is leavened with optimism and hope. Not only the dreams of the female protagonist Vera Pavlovna but the whole novel must be considered utopian in the sense of offering the prospect of a bright future, be it difficult to realize. The end of the story implies that the revolution will occur within a couple of years.

The novel focuses on two themes: the emancipation of women and the abolition of poverty. Tsarist censorship allowed the author to deal rather explicitly with women's liberation but it made him extremely cautious in writing about the social problem of poverty and the dependence of the lower classes, which is touched upon only in passing or suggested in vague terms. However, perspicacious readers trained in interpreting Aesopian language had no difficulty in recognizing Chernyshevsky's call for political action. Therefore, it remains amazing that neither the prison censor nor the censor of the journal *Sovremennik*, which published the novel in installments in 1863, spotted the subversive nature of the story that more than any other text prepared the Russian people for revolution. The novel appeared as a book two years later.

The romantic plot suited the taste of the Petersburg elite spoiled by Verdi's operas and French novels. Against the wish of her parents, Vera Pavlovna refuses to marry a rich man and begins to like Lopukhov, a medical student and tutor of her younger brother. He maintains high ideals and fully respects the independence of women in matters of marriage. In all respects Lopukhov is a modern man, intrigued by scientific research. He relates that he has a fiancée, who turns out to be an allegorical representation of the revolutionary transformation of society and is called "Love of Humanity" (Chernyshevsky 1989: 131), and he recommends to Vera that she read Considérant's *Destinée sociale* and Feuerbach's critique of religion. He ex-

plains his materialist conception of the human will and believes “that man acts out of necessity and that his actions are determined by the influences under which these actions occur” (117). However, none of the characters in the novel appear to behave as a product of materialist determinism.

Lopukhov and Vera become close friends and fall in love without any show of passion. He abducts her (with her full consent and cooperation, of course) and asks a priest he knows to marry them. Preparing his bride for the celebration, he asks her: “You do know that during the ceremony the couple is supposed to kiss?” Whereupon she says: “Yes, my dear. How embarrassing!” (157). It appears from the context that Vera is not joking, but the narrator is being unmistakably ironic. The passage anticipates the chastity of their married life and its final breakup. However, before this happens, Vera starts a cooperative dressmaking shop inspired by French utopian socialism. Kirsanov, a former friend of Lopukhov and now a medical doctor with a strong interest in the modern experimental physiology of Claude Bernard, turns up and falls in love with Vera. In a modern, rational way Lopukhov draws his conclusions and “quits the scene” by committing suicide on a bridge over the Neva. His cap is found with a bullet hole in it, but his body is never retrieved. Immediately after Lopukhov’s death, Rakhmetov pays a visit to Vera and explains that she should not regret her husband’s suicide and should feel free to marry Kirsanov.

Rakhmetov belongs to a network of young revolutionaries and displays all the qualities of an “extraordinary man” (271; “osobennyj chelovek” [Chernyshevsky 1966: 289]). He stands at the origin of a long pedigree of “positive heroes” (Mathewson 1975), not only in Russian fiction but also in Chinese literature. Chernyshevsky needs about twenty pages to sketch the uncommon qualities of Rakhmetov, a descendent of a distinguished but now impoverished family, a strong man in the tradition of the *bogatyr* (an heroic warrior), with an enormous strength of will, who once worked as a barge hauler along the Volga. When Kirsanov persuades him to read books, his physical strength is matched by an equally strong intellectual interest. His switch to reading progressive works is considered a conversion or rebirth (Chernyshevsky 1989: 282; “pererozhdenie” [1966: 301]), and this is not the only reference to a quasi-religious commitment. He abstains from wine and promises never to touch a woman in order not to be distracted from his goal. He has principles but no passions, convictions but no personal desires. Except for eating huge quantities of beef to maintain his physical condition, he leads an austere life, having only one weakness and that is a particular liking for cigars, on which he spends a considerable part of his income.

When selecting his books he reads only “what was absolutely necessary” (1989: 282). He maintains:

There are only a few fundamental works on every subject. All the rest merely repeat, dilute, and distort what’s more fully and clearly stated in these few fundamental works. One need read only those; anything else is a terrible waste of time.” (282)

Rakhmetov has restricted his reading of Russian literature to Gogol and has further studied the economists Adam Smith, T.R. Malthus, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill. Of English literature he has read only Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, the novel that exposes the superficiality and snobbery of the British upper middle class. Gymnastics, physical labor, and reading occupy about a quarter of his time. The remainder is devoted “to matters of concern to others or to no one in particular” (284), a phrasing which has been interpreted as an allusion to revolutionary activities. In order to test his own willpower Rakhmetov once slept on a blanket with hundreds of nails, hurting his body and getting covered in blood, just as saints supposedly did in order to avert temptation.

In his talk with Vera after Lopukhov’s suicide, Rakhmetov reproaches her for considering giving up the dressmaking cooperative. That would harm the cause of all humankind and betray the idea of progress. “In ecclesiastical language,” says Rakhmetov, it would be called “a sin against the Holy Spirit” (302). This severe judgment and, more in general, his interference in Vera’s life at this particular moment, immediately after her husband’s suicide, appears rather distasteful, and quite logically Vera protests. Then Rakhmetov produces a letter written by Lopukhov shortly before his death, asking Vera to listen to everything Rakhmetov has to say, though he does not know what he will tell her: “But I know that he never says anything unnecessary” (304). Here Lopukhov is asking for blind obedience, a secularized trust in the superhuman qualities of the “positive hero.” Of course, the hero also accomplishes heroic deeds. One day, not far from St. Petersburg, Rakhmetov saw that a horse pulling a lady’s carriage had bolted. The lady who was driving had completely lost control of the horse. Rakhmetov grabbed the rear axle and with great effort brought the carriage to a halt. He was seriously wounded on one leg and asked for Kirsanov to treat him. The lady cared for the wounded man and began to like him, but Rakhmetov resisted the temptation. In her dreams she sees Rakhmetov with the halo of a saint (289).

No wonder Vera heeds the advice of this extraordinary man and marries Kirsanov a week after Lopukhov's disappearance. Her decision is in accordance with the materialist theory of rational egoism, of which both Vera and Kirsanov apparently approve (323–327) and which Chernyshevsky had defended earlier in an essay on the anthropological principle in philosophy (180n).

This whole episode from Rakhmetov's meddling in Vera's personal affairs to the hasty marriage with Kirsanov is rather unpalatable from a psychological point of view, and Chernyshevsky seems to have known it since he supplements the abstract, all too schematic plot construction with commentary by the narrator. At one point the narrator also participates in his own story as a character, called Mr. N., with whom Rakhmetov wishes to make acquaintance (285). The metanarrative commentary predicting further plot developments must evidently make up for the lack of psychological motivation among the various characters, who remain puppets voicing abstract ideas about women's liberation and social revolution.

Apart from the lack of psychological realism, there is the dubious paradox of combining voluntarist heroism (embodied by Rakhmetov) with the tenet of materialist determinism. This touches upon a general problem and a brief comment may be appropriate here. Chernyshevsky nowhere explains how the course of history that is determined by material conditions could be altered by a single strong-willed individual. If the individual is the product of physiological matter and social environment, what difference can he make? Marx and Engels addressed the question of the revolutionary commitment of individual people in a world determined by the laws of historical materialism. They tried to solve the paradox by proposing that an individual who is aware of those laws should try to act in accordance with them: to help historical development, so to speak, by not obstructing it. In *Anti-Dühring* (1878) Engels advanced the tortuous reasoning that "freedom consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, which is founded on knowledge of natural necessity" ("Freiheit besteht also in der, auf Erkenntnis der Naturnothwendigkeiten gegründeten Herrschaft über uns selbst und über die äussere Natur" [1988: 312]). A similar way out is suggested in *What Is to Be Done?*, but this solution, too, is not very satisfactory, as it posits an individual free will independent from determining material conditions, which is logically impossible. Therefore, a choice must be made: either people are completely determined by genetic conditions and their social and material environment, or they have at least to some extent a free will. The question has haunted numerous writers of eutopian as well as

dystopian fiction, Dostoevsky being the most prominent among those dealing with the problem. The discussion pertains to Mao Zedong's voluntarist pronouncements (see chapter 15) and it is still continuing both within and outside of the Marxist context. At one point some advance was made, however, since the idea that there are laws of historical development that blindly steer our social life, as propounded by Marx and Engels, is generally no longer accepted.

Vera Pavlovna exemplifies the role of a strong-willed personality just as well as Rakhmetov and Kirsanov. She wants to be equal to her husband and become a medical doctor. She has fantasies about a better world and in particular her fourth and last dream conveys a utopia that has stimulated the imagination of many readers. In this dream she sees various historical stages of increasingly perfect societies. Goethe is quoted to evoke an idyllic scene: "How splendid the brightness / Of nature around me" ("Wie herrlich leuchtet / Mir die Natur" [359]). Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* is cited as a step forward in the emancipation of women (365). Chernyshevsky also follows Rousseau in his decision to select a rural setting for Vera's utopian dream. Actually, Rousseau's novel served in various respects as a source of inspiration. There are parallels between the plot of *Julie* and that of *What Is to Be Done?*, for instance, where both Saint-Preux and Lopukhov abruptly disappear because of a frustrated love relation. The two novels also share an ascetic interest in the ecclesiastical culture of the Middle Ages.

When her dream switches to modern times, Vera sees a large building of cast iron and crystal, resembling, as she says, the Crystal Palace at Sydenham in south London (370), which was originally erected in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and was destroyed by fire in 1936. But it also recalls Fourier's *phalanstères*, as it houses hundreds of people under utopian conditions. It is a miracle of science and technology, in particular because of its use of aluminum – produced industrially only since the middle of the nineteenth century. The narrator is enraptured by the view of cast iron, glass, and aluminum: "The entire house is a huge winter garden" (370). Several years earlier Victor Considérant had mentioned in a book on architecture that in the central square of a phalanstery an enormous "jardin d'hiver" was to be erected (1848: 62).

She dreams that people return from the fields where machines have been doing almost all the work. They dine together in one of the huge halls, at least a thousand of them, but not everyone has come. Those who prefer to eat in their own rooms can do so. Elderly people and children who did not

work in the fields have prepared the food. The meal is free of charge, except if one wishes to have extra dishes. Vera is assured that everyone likes the arrangement and is completely happy. There are numerous opportunities for relaxation, including making love, but how this is arranged remains rather mysterious. The allegorical goddess who proudly declares that she reigns here and everything is done for her sake is equally a mystery: paradoxically she claims to constitute “the purpose of life,” yet everyone can live life as they wish: “Each and every person has a complete will, yes, free will” (1989: 378; “vsem i kazhdomu – polnaya volya, vol’naya volya” [1966: 411]). A sister of the goddess appeals to Vera to communicate what she has seen to other people. The future will be radiant and beautiful. “Strive toward it, work for it, bring it nearer, transfer into the present as much as you can from it” (379). With these words the dream ends.

It is not only this dream that makes *What Is to Be Done?* into a utopian novel. The behavior of the various exemplary characters – the emancipated Vera, the progressive Kirsanov and Lopukhov, and the positive hero Rakhmetov – and their mutual relations suggest a utopian ideal as well. The story continues and introduces a man born in Russia who has spent many years in the United States and is rabidly on the side of the abolitionists. In addition, this Charles Beaumont, as he is called, defends the rights of women; and Katya, his prospective fiancée, calls him teasingly “the Harriet Beecher Stowe of the woman’s question” (425). Katya has been treated by doctor Kirsanov and talks about him and his wife. Beaumont is particularly curious about Vera. In short, as the kitschy plot develops, Beaumont turns out to be Lopukhov who had “quitted the scene” and now reappears alive. He had not committed suicide but had emigrated to the United States. Back in Petersburg again he marries Katya. Kirsanov and Vera are filled with joy when they hear that Lopukhov has returned to life. Vera exclaims in terms from the Orthodox Easter liturgy: “Verily He is risen” (1989: 427; “voistinu voskres” [1966: 467]). From then on the four friends live in the greatest harmony. Like Saint-Preux, Lopukhov considers his former love a good friend. Katya assists Vera, busy with her medical examinations, in her cooperative dressmaking shop and also establishes one of her own. They all look forward to the revolution, which they expect to happen at any time.

## *Dostoevsky's Notes from Underground*

Immediately after *What Is to Be Done?* had appeared, Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) wrote a polemical reaction which under the title *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ya*) was published in the journal *Epokha* in the first half of 1864. However, it would be a simplification to see *Notes* as directed only at Chernyshevsky's novel. In fact, it also contained a critique of French utopian socialism, which was much debated among the Petersburg intelligentsia in the 1840s and found many admirers, notably in the Petrashevsky Circle, which Dostoevsky had participated in, although he did not share the unconditional admiration for French utopianism displayed by the other members of the group. He doubted that communist egalitarianism was the only true form of Christian belief, as Cabet had argued, and considered it unlikely that socialist theory could work in practice (Frank 1976–2002: vol. 1, 252).

Although Dostoevsky played no central role in the Petrashevsky Circle, his participation in the discussions of that group was the major reason for his arrest in 1849. Sentenced to hard labor in Siberia, later changed into compulsory military service, he was only allowed to return to St. Petersburg in 1859. *Notes* as well as his other work bear the traces of this ten-year period of imprisonment and exile. In a letter of 1854 Dostoevsky writes:

It is now almost five years that I have been under guard among a crowd of people, and I never had a single hour alone. To be alone is a normal need, like eating and drinking; otherwise, in this enforced communism one turns into a hater of mankind [“v nasil'stvennom ètom kommunizme sdelayesh'-sya chelovekonenavistnikom”]. The society of other people becomes an unbearable torture, and it was from this that I suffered most. (Quoted in Frank 1976–2002: vol. 2, 151–152 [Russian text: Dostoevsky 1968: 143])

The wish to be sometimes alone in a “communist” environment in order to be able to think for oneself and to feel independent from others is clearly echoed in *Notes*.

While still in Siberia, Dostoevsky married Marya Isayeva. Six years later, in 1863, he began a tortuous liaison with Apollinaria Suslova, who accompanied him on some of his journeys to western Europe. Marya was fatally ill and died of consumption the next year. The complexity of the author's personal situation is reflected in *Notes*, which describes a wide range of fluctuating moods, making the short novel into a sourcebook for students of psy-

chology. However, the text mainly focuses on the crucial question of materialist determinism and its impossible consequences and is, as I see it, primarily a *philosophical* novel. In *Devils* Dostoevsky continued this subject matter with an additional discussion of the *political* effects of a totalitarian worldview.

The first-person narrator in *Notes from Underground* presents a sustained argument against any attempt to realize a eutopian society. Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* provided Dostoevsky with a welcome occasion to vent his fundamental objections to the arrogance and shortsightedness of those who believed that communal bliss would be capable of satisfying individual want and desire, if people would only see their true interests. The story is a running indictment against overestimating the value of science, mathematics, and rationality. It challenges the arithmetic of two times two is four by suggesting that the proposition that two times two is five is also something worth contemplating. The underground man considers his capacity for reasoning to be only a small part of his entire capacity for living:

What does reason know? Reason only knows what it has managed to discover (the rest, perhaps, it will never discover; that's little comfort, but why not say it outright?), whereas human nature acts as a whole, with everything it comprises, conscious or unconscious; it may talk nonsense, yet it lives. (Dostoevsky 2009: 26)

The underground man claims the right to desire what in the eyes of others may appear stupid and rejects the obligation to desire only intelligent things. Rather persuasively, he values freedom of decision more than enforced happiness, being afraid that the predictable outcome of applied reason will crush his personality. He prefers being independent and unhappy over a collective happiness that other people tell him to join. With an obvious gibe at Fourier's (1841) extravagant systematization of linking character traits, educational methods, and prospective professions, as well as his idea of the general keyboard ("clavier générale") of a phalanx, the underground man argues that people are not piano keys played by the laws of nature "until nothing can be desired that is not tabulated in the directory" (Dostoevsky 2009: 28; cf. Frank 1976-2002: vol. 3, 325).

As a fictional character, the self-conscious underground man must be unhappy in order to substantiate the argument against rationally invented communal bliss. But "unhappy" is too weak a term: he is a sick man, unattractive, lazy, moody, suspicious as well as superstitious, a coward, a spiteful

civil servant, rude and enjoying being rude, vain but at the same time timid and without self-respect, in short, socially and mentally the prototype of the underdog or, to use Dostoevsky's term, an "antihero" (117; "antigeroj" [2006: 698]). The underground man is constructed in opposition to the heroic characters of *What Is to Be Done*. He is ill but avoids consulting a physician, whereas three protagonists in Chernyshevsky's novel study medicine or work as doctors. He is indecisive; they are men of action. He distrusts science or sees only a very limited role for it; they build their world view on materialist physiology and rational egoism. He acts completely irrationally in an erotic encounter and appears incapable of love; they love rationally, with subdued passion, extending that love to all humanity. He abhors the Crystal Palace, which Vera Pavlovna in her dream considers the pinnacle of scientific ingenuity and technological potential.

Dostoevsky had visited London in 1862 and was struck by the sordidness and mass misery of the city. He also saw the Crystal Palace, which he writes about in his travel diary. It seems so "majestic, victorious, and proud that it takes your breath away." One feels "that something has been finally completed and terminated," fulfilling a "prophecy of the Apocalypse" (quoted in Frank 1976-2002: vol. 3, 239). The contradiction between this triumph of modernity and the low life of the people in the streets, looking for material gain and sensual pleasure, confirmed Dostoevsky's idea of the depravity of western European culture and made him turn to traditional ideas of the Russian peasants' community, the *obshchina* – the Russian variant of the Chinese well-field system.

In *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky attacks Chernyshevsky's favorable description of the Crystal Palace in Vera's fourth dream, but he does not discuss the paradoxical claim of the goddess that she embodies the purpose of life while at the same time everyone has a will that is completely free. The erection of the Crystal Palace, the underground man suggests, signals the beginning of a Golden Age, in which all desires will be fulfilled and which, therefore, might be incredibly boring. One could even suspect that one day a reactionary and mocking man would arise "amidst this universal good sense" and call on people to get rid of good sense and begin "to live according to our own foolish will" (2009: 23). The underground man predicts that the call to follow one's own volition would have an enormous response. Here Dostoevsky has phrased a psychologically convincing, fundamental objection to any attempt at realizing a eutopia on earth. Julian Barnes (1989), assuming that heaven will be boring, argued along more or less similar lines.

The underground man concedes that man, as a creative animal, will always strive towards a goal and will construct a road for himself “wherever it may lead” (30). However, achieving the goal, without seeing a new one, is frightening. The terrifying thing of the Crystal Palace is that it is at the very end of the road; that it is “completed and terminated,” as Dostoevsky noted in his travel diary. Joseph Frank and other commentators have assumed with good reason that in chapter 10 of the first part of *Notes from Underground* Dostoevsky had intended to show that the Christian faith can offer a way out of the materialist worldview, a life beyond the satisfaction of material needs, but that censorship suppressed those passages for unclear reasons. Perhaps Dostoevsky wished indeed to bring in religious salvation as a way to rescue humans from the idea of being capable of achieving eutopia and from the concomitant boredom. Some passages in chapter 10 point in that direction, for instance, where the underground man considers an alternative to the Crystal Palace, namely a hen house or a mansion: “Give me another ideal,” he says (33). Whether Dostoevsky had wanted to refer to the House of the Lord cannot be decided, but it is not improbable. Whatever the case, he was probably motivated by his Orthodox belief in rejecting attempts to realize a utopian society on earth. Again it emerges that a proponent of revealed religion has less affinity with utopian projects than secular thinkers. It is of course easier to be critical of utopianism if you believe that the promise of perfection will be redeemed in the hereafter.

While the first part of *Notes from Underground* offers an abstract philosophical monologue uttered by the underground man who addresses some imagined gentlemen and their ideas of materialist determinism, the second part contains a dialogical representation of haunting memories of personal experiences, such as a humiliating meeting of the underground man with former friends and an encounter with a prostitute whom he ostensibly wants to save from her dreadful existence and then insults and betrays. This second part is also a denial of heroic action and shows, at the other extreme, the miserable underground man combining the roles of an utterly despicable character and unreliable narrator. His confessions are a game, a game that fascinates him, but also more than a game (93). They are lies, just as Rousseau in his *Confessions* undoubtedly lied about himself (36).

The prostitute is called Liza, which is also the name of the female protagonist in Turgenev’s novel *Home of the Gentry* (*Dvoryanskoe gnezdo*, 1859). But where the love affair between Liza and Lavretsky has a respectable ending in her taking the veil, the false and frustrating relation between the underground man and Liza in *Notes from Underground* ends in painful misery

and lies. Perhaps Dostoevsky, never a wholehearted supporter of Turgenev, wanted in this way to express his doubts about the conventional self-sacrifice of the other Liza. The narrator also refers to N. A. Nekrasov and quotes a fragment from a poem about the salvation of a prostitute as an epigraph to the second part of *Notes*, repeating several lines in the text to ironical effect. However, in contradistinction to Nekrasov's dealing with this topic, the underground man is totally incapable of liberating a girl of easy virtue from her sordid profession, incapable of acting according to the cliché of the redeemed prostitute elaborated by George Sand and other French romantics (101). It is as if the cynical narrator wants to say that not only the underground man but also humans in general are not capable of any noble action. No one can live up to the ideal of perfection, which Chernyshevsky's heroes intend to realize in their utopia but which Dostoevsky considers beyond the reach of human beings, except in a total surrender to the Orthodox faith. If this interpretation is correct, it confirms again my assumption of the incompatibility of revealed religion with any form of earthly utopianism.

#### *Nihilism in Fathers and Sons: Pisarev's and Chernyshevsky's interpretations*

The untimely deceased but influential literary critic Dmitry Pisarev (1840-1868) played a crucial part in bringing about a schism between moderate and immoderate revolutionaries in Russia. With obvious sympathy for the latter faction he summoned the radicals in an 1861 article to "strike right and left, no harm can come of it and no harm will come," because "what resists the blow is worth keeping; what flies to pieces is rubbish" (quoted in Frank 1976-2002: vol. 4, 70). He provided the ideological justification for total negation and at the same time made the revolution a kind of personal fulfillment, an emancipation of the individual. It is the combination of arrogance and extremism that characterizes the nihilists, as well as, I would add, later Communist leaders who succumbed to totalitarian proclivities. When referring to the theory of rational egoism, Chernyshevsky had never advocated individual caprice. It is a new element, which introduced a division between quasi-infallible leaders and the inert masses, a division which left its mark on the development of Marxism-Leninism but which democratically oriented leftists, such as the Dutch communist Herman Gorter, could not accept.

Pisarev's distinction between moderate and immoderate radicals be-

came widely known through his lengthy review of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (*Ottsy i deti*, literally: "Fathers and Children," 1861), in which Turgenev had portrayed the radical student Bazarov rather unfavorably. That, at least, is what Chernyshevsky to his chagrin and Dostoevsky to his relief read in the novel, and they were not the only ones, for a leftist critic publishing in *Sovremennik* castigated Turgenev for having slandered the radical movement (Frank 1976-2002: vol. 4, 70-71).

In order to understand Pisarev's essay "Bazarov" (1862), it is necessary to say a few words about *Fathers and Sons*. In Turgenev's novel we get to know Bazarov as a young man in his early twenties who together with his friend Arkady Kirsanov visits the latter's father as well as his own parents after several years of study at the University of St. Petersburg. He is interested in the natural sciences and aims to take a degree in medicine, but has no affinity with art or letters. Arkady explains that Bazarov is a nihilist, and "a nihilist is a person who does not take any principle for granted, however much that principle may be revered" (Turgenev 1975: 94). He is a virile "angry young man" with long hair and a broad forehead, self-assured and intelligent. "A decent chemist is twenty times more useful than any poet," Bazarov says (97). He argues that "what is important is that two and two make four, and the rest is just trivial" (116), which three years later may have instigated Dostoevsky to consider the possibility that two times two is five in *Notes from Underground*. Bazarov has brought a microscope with him and spends hours on studying plants and seeds or the entrails of a frog. He persuades Arkady that his father should not read Pushkin or similar romantic rubbish but a book by the German materialist Ludwig Büchner. And anticipating the Futurists he considers Raphael not worth a penny. No wonder that Arkady's conservative uncle, Pavel Petrovich, considers Bazarov an arrogant, impudent, cynical, and vulgar fellow. As Goudsblom (1980) has shown, Bazarov represents only one particular variant of nihilism among the many uses of the term in nineteenth-century Europe.

Like Chernyshevsky's heroes, Bazarov bases his conduct on what he recognizes as useful, but unlike them he argues that "in these days the most useful thing we can do is to repudiate," that is, to repudiate everything (123). Destruction precedes construction, "the ground must be cleared first" (124). Bazarov ventures that so far the progressives and reformers did not accomplish anything and "even the emancipation of the serfs ... is not likely to be to our advantage, since those peasants of ours are only too glad to rob even themselves to drink themselves silly at the gin-shop" (126). Here the difference which Bazarov, in line with Pisarev, makes between

himself and the masses comes to the fore. Pavel Petrovich, the aristocratic opponent of Bazarov in the debate, notices a “Satanic pride” in him (127). Later Bazarov talks superciliously about his loyal disciple Sitnikov. I need such louts, he says, but they are different from the gods. At this point Arkady becomes aware of the depth of Bazarov’s conceit and he realizes that in the eyes of the quasi-godlike Bazarov he too belongs to the fools (188).

Bazarov has a weakness for women, declares his love to a young widow, and flirts with Fenichka, the wife of Arkady’s father. The latter episode is reason for a duel with Pavel Petrovich and for Bazarov’s departure. He returns to his middle-class parents and assists his father, a retired army doctor, in his medical work. This is how Bazarov is infected with typhus, which causes his death.

Is Bazarov a positive or a negative character? Apparently Turgenev, politically aloof and indecisive, was not sure himself. When he began writing the novel he did not know where the story would lead (Berlin 1975). In *What Is to Be Done?* Chernyshevsky tried to improve the image of the rebellious hero and recast the cynical Bazarov, who had neither a political program nor any valuable allies, in the shape of the more positive character of Rakhmetov. By choosing the name Kirsanov for one of his other heroes, Chernyshevsky obviously wished to establish a link with his namesake Arkady Kirsanov and his family in *Fathers and Sons*. Chernyshevsky must have been extremely unhappy about the portrayal of the cynical Bazarov.

Pisarev wrote his defense of Bazarov in March 1862, briefly after *Fathers and Sons* had appeared and several months before Chernyshevsky was arrested and began writing his novel. Under Pisarev’s pen, all the traits of Bazarov’s character that others had considered negative became the correct representation of a social phenomenon. When Turgenev makes Pavel Petrovich say that Bazarov is driven by satanic pride, Pisarev writes that the expression is very well chosen and precisely characterizes “our hero” (Pisarev 1968: 53). He notes that Bazarov is guided by personal calculation or personal caprice and is not bound by any moral laws or principles. He has neither high aims nor high thoughts, but disposes of an enormous strength. Except for his personal taste, nothing can prevent him from killing or robbing. Many people say that he is a totally amoral man, a scoundrel, and Pisarev agrees, but he adds that the image of Bazarov cannot be destroyed. If Bazarov represents a disease, it is a disease of our time, which we must endure (54). Bazarov, Pisarev concludes, stands for a radical development among a new generation in Russia, which is drawn to extremism and in its

enthusiasm shows a new force and an incorruptible mind. “Without any outside assistance or encouragement this strength and this spirit lead young people on the right road and provide them with a prop and stay in their life” (95). In the last paragraph of his essay he asks: “What is to be done?” – a question Chernyshevsky took up and, as we have seen, answered rather differently from what Bazarov, or Pisarev, had in mind.

### *The dystopian consequences of nihilism in Devils*

Peter Verkhovensky, the main character in *Devils*, is modeled after the notorious nihilist Sergei Nechayev, leader of a small group of radical students in Moscow, who on November 26, 1869, murdered one of the members of that group, probably merely because of his wish to assert his right to absolute dictatorial control (Frank 1976–2002: vol. 4, 400). Nechayev was an effective agitator and had in the past been helped by Mikhail Bakunin, the anarchist living at that time in western Europe, in mailing inflammatory pamphlets to Russia. After the murder, Nechayev managed to escape to Switzerland but was arrested by the police in 1872 and extradited to Russia, where he was sentenced to twenty years of hard labor and exile to Siberia. However, by personal order of Tsar Alexander II he was secretly kept for life in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg. Thanks to good relations with his guards, he managed to remain in contact with revolutionaries outside the Fortress. He died in prison in 1882 (443).

In the novel Peter Verkhovensky, no less cunning and cruel than Nechayev, is at the center of a frightening dystopia. He is the product of an ideology that Dostoevsky aims to trace back to its origins. Dostoevsky was very much upset by the growth of extremist tendencies among the radicals, which partly resulted from frustration over a revolution that did not take place, a revolution that was expected in the wake of the abolition of serfdom in 1861 but failed to materialize. He was shocked by Pisarev’s interpretation of *Fathers and Sons* and his suggestion that young people should follow Bazarov’s example. As Pisarev had written, Bazarovism allowed for robbing and killing. Dostoevsky reacted by creating the character Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and showing the consequences of a senseless murder. In *Devils* he resumed the theme, now extended to a search for the origins of nihilist violence, which led him to a critique of socialist utopianism and materialist determinism, as well as an analysis of the atheist conception of free will, the desire for dictatorial control among young radicals,

and the complacency and hypocrisy of the elder generation. He showed the disastrous effect of nihilism on various characters involved in murder or suicide. Not only did he criticize the Bazarov syndrome but also Turgenev's wavering presentation of his nihilist hero. In *Devils*, the vain and self-concerned Karmazinov is a caricature of the westernized Turgenev.

The novel is set in a provincial town, not far from Moscow, and the story is told by a narrator who wants to record spectacular events that "recently" occurred but that can only be understood by going several decades back in time. Thus the novel opens with a sketch of the career of Stepan Verkhovensky, Peter's father, a spineless liberal intellectual who accepts the offer to become the private teacher to the son of Varvara Petrovna Stavroginna, a rich woman living on a magnificent estate just outside town. Stepan, a widower, maintains close but often strained ties of friendship with her for many years. When their sons have grown up they meet and collaborate, with great admiration from the side of Peter for the arrogant and demonic Nikolai Stavrogin. This constellation of principal characters enables Dostoevsky to write about the clash between two generations, just as Turgenev had done.

Indeed, Peter and, in a different way, Nikolai show many traits of Bazarovism. Stepan Verkhovensky, Varvara, and other characters of their generation represent the weaknesses and wavering of the Kirsanovs in *Fathers and Sons*. Where Turgenev abstained from a clear moral judgment on Bazarov, Dostoevsky shows the full consequences of nihilism and leaves no doubts about what he thinks of it. The citation from Luke 8: 32-35, relating how Jesus ordered evil spirits to leave the man they possess and enter a herd of swine, serves as an epigraph to the novel and must be interpreted rather literally as (Orthodox) Christianity being capable of providing a cure to demonic nihilism. This is Joseph Frank's interpretation of the epigraph and I find it convincing in view of the role of Stavrogin that Dostoevsky originally had in mind, as it appears in a chapter that remained unpublished during the author's lifetime and only appeared in print in the 1920s – it is usually added as an annex to recent translations and also to the 2005 Russian edition used here. In this chapter, the unpredictable Stavrogin seeks a meeting with the Orthodox bishop Tikhon and asks him to read the confession he has written. In the originally published novel no mention is made of any confession by Stavrogin.

The other epigraph, a quotation from Pushkin's lyrical ballad "Devils" ("Besy," 1830), is equally important. Not only did it provide the title for Dostoevsky's novel, but the quoted fragment contains also the phrase

“What are we to do?” (“Что делать?”, a question that occupies Dostoevsky as much as Chernyshevsky and Pisarev (Dostoevsky 1992: 2; Dostoevsky 2005: 109). I am not suggesting that intertextual relations are the primary constructive principle of this novel of ideas, but they do testify that Dostoevsky was involved in a continuous dialogue with other writers of his time.

One of the places where the various characters meet is Varvara Petrovna’s estate, Skvoreshniki. Here she held her soirées, allowing her guests to participate in intellectual debate, to make music or play cards, and of course to eat and drink. It is in this frivolous company sketched with satirical effect that we must look for those who, according to Dostoevsky, can be held responsible for the nightmare of nihilism. Here, all kinds of loose opinions are launched without any particular consequences. Stepan Verkhovensky calls himself a “higher liberal,” that is, a liberal without goals (1992: 33). He also has the reputation of being an atheist, although he really is not one, and he loves to talk about the Russian spirit, the fate of Europe and all mankind. He can be considered progressive, being an admirer of George Sand, who eloquently defended the rights of women.

Another character, Liputin, is a Fourierist and enthuses over a book by Victor Considérant. Shatov, however, does not share this admiration for French utopian socialism, and poses as a Slavophile instead. He maintains that “socialism by its very nature must be atheism” (263), although Cabet and Saint-Simon were of a different opinion. His defense of Pan-Slavism shows several parallels with the argument of the underground man, mentioned above, that the human capacity for reasoning is only a small part of one’s entire capacity for living:

Reason and science have always, now and from the beginning of time, played only a secondary and subordinate role in the life of nations; and so it will be until the end of time. Nations are formed and moved by some other force that commands and dominates them, whose origin is unknown and inexplicable. This force is the force of an insatiable desire to go on until the end, while at the same time denying that there is an end. It is the force of a continual and indefatigable affirmation of its own being and the denial of death. (264)

Shatov believes that the goal of every national movement solely is the search for God. There has never been a nation without religion and without a conception of good and evil, he says, adding that “every nation has its

own conception, and its own particular good and evil" (264). Dostoevsky sketches the Slavophile worldview with some sympathy, but cannot fully endorse it as it detracts from the universalist claim of the Orthodox belief (Frank 1976-2002: vol. 4, 483). Yet, Shatov appears to speak again for Dostoevsky when he maintains that "reason has never been powerful enough to define good and evil or to demarcate good from evil" (1992: 264). This is a crucial observation of which Dostoevsky wishes to show the consequences. Nihilism is conceived of as a product of cold reason, and its exponents Peter Verkhovensky and Nikolai Stavrogin cannot distinguish between good and evil and are shown to indulge in lies and crime. The idea of the virtuous atheist, propounded by Bayle and other Enlightenment philosophers, does not fit in with Dostoevsky's semantic universe. The Confucian as well as Christian admonition to treat others as you would wish them to treat you, based on rational convention and widely accepted, remains below Dostoevsky's exalted conception of religion as total surrender and absolute unselfishness.

Dostoevsky's dystopia begins with atheism, which in his view implies the impossibility to define good and evil and thus prohibits any attempt to establish paradise on earth. Thus *What Is to Be Done?*, including its discussion of French utopian socialism, must be repudiated. However, when Stepan Verkhovensky reads this "catechism" of the young revolutionaries, including his own son – who in fact have more in common with the nihilist Bazarov than with the socialist Rakhmetov – he develops some sympathy for Chernyshevsky. The author's idea of revolutionary change is mainly correct, Stepan admits: "We were the first to plant it, nurture it, prepare the way – what could they possibly say that was new after us?" (320). The nihilists, however, went beyond utopian socialism and rejected the idea of a socialist revolution that had a clear goal and a moral justification.

At a political meeting convened by Peter Verkhovensky on the pretext of having a birthday party, Shigalyov presents a peculiar outline of how to solve all social problems and establish a perfect society. He admits that he will begin with the idea of unlimited freedom, although it inevitably will lead to unlimited despotism, but that does not prevent him from explaining his plan. So far, he argues, all creators of social systems failed. "Plato, Rousseau, Fourier, aluminium columns – all that is good only for sparrows, not human society" (426). The aluminum columns refer of course to Vera Pavlovna's dream in *What Is to Be Done*. Shigalyov proposes to divide humanity into two unequal parts. One-tenth will have personal freedom and unlimited power over the other nine-tenths, who will be reeducated on a

scientific basis and in the course of several generations will become deprived of their will, regaining a kind of primeval innocence although they still have to work. This plan reminds us of Émile Souvestre's dystopian *Le Monde tel qu'il sera* (discussed in chapter 8), which Dostoevsky may have known or heard about since, as Frank (1976-2002: vol. 1, 128) mentions, he was acquainted with other work by the same author. Shigalyov's proposal anticipates the artificial division into social classes by way of genetic manipulation and psychological indoctrination in *Brave New World*.

Peter Verkhovensky, presiding over the meeting, cuts the discussion short by saying that "all these books by Fourier and Cabet, all this 'right to work' talk, this Shigalyov scheme – it's all like novels ... An aesthetic pastime" (1992: 429). Someone mentions that pamphlets of foreign origin have been distributed urging to form small groups "for the sole purpose of bringing about total destruction" (430). Finally Verkhovensky manipulates the meeting in such a way that no one dares to object to swift action in the spirit of the pamphlets.

The theory of nihilism is quickly summarized, but its true nature appears more clearly from what the nihilists in the novel actually do. In the absence of any ethical rules and with the goal of total destruction in mind, everything is permitted, including deceiving one's close allies. Several men willing to act mistakenly believe that the organization has a central committee and numerous branches. However, Peter informed Stavrogin that the two of them alone form the central committee and that there is only one circle of five active rebels, whereupon Stavrogin suggested to persuade four members of the circle to liquidate the fifth on the pretext that he is a potential informer. The blood thus being shed would bind them together (408). This cunning scheme is indeed followed in the disgusting sixth chapter of part three of the novel.

Peter Verkhovensky selects Shatov, the Slavophile, for the role of victim. Although Shatov had made it clear that he did not want to be involved anymore in revolutionary action, there is not the slightest indication that he will betray the nihilist circle. Nevertheless, he is lured to a remote pond in the park of Skvoreshniki, seized by his former comrades and shot by Peter. They make his body heavy with stones and throw it into the pond. The various reactions of the perpetrators are subdued by the terror Peter exerts on them.

However, Peter's villainous scheming does not end here. He knows that Kirillov, also a nihilist, is considering committing suicide in order to prove that he has a free will and God does not exist; it will be, in Kirillov's words, a

suicide “without any reason, simply out of self-will” (692; “bezo vsyakoj prichiny, a tol’ko dlya svoevoliya” [2005: 624]). Elsewhere I have discussed his precise argumentation, which attracted much attention from later writers such as Gide and Camus (Fokkema 2002). Here it is relevant to consider the use Peter wishes to make of the suicide, thereby showing another repugnant aspect of this nihilist plotter. Kirillov’s existential problem is no more than a utility for Peter, who tries to persuade Kirillov to falsely confess to having murdered Shatov. As a nihilist on the brink of death, it should make no difference to write such a confession, Peter argues. After some hesitation Kirillov agrees to do so and he asks Peter to dictate the statement. He intends to sign in French with “de Kirillov, gentilhomme russe et citoyen du monde” (1992: 696), a phrase which he then reconsiders and changes into “gentilhomme-séminariste russe et citoyen du monde civilisé” (696–697), as if he is enjoying the stylistic play until his very last hour; unwittingly he anticipates Berdyayev’s observation about the link between Orthodoxy and nihilism. The subscription in a foreign language makes the suicide also into a symptom of pernicious Western influence. The strongest disapproval of the suicide, however, is that a cunning scoundrel such as Peter can so easily take advantage of it: Kirillov, who in his naivety imagines himself to be a savior of humankind, a second Redeemer, is in fact made into an accomplice in the murder of Shatov. Kirillov can sign the false statement since “it’s all the same” (685) to him. From the perspective of absolute freedom, all moral problems evaporate. That same night Kirillov shoots himself.

The intrigues, intimidation, and criminal activities of Peter Verkhoven-sky have been interpreted as a distortion of the history of the leftist movement in Russia, but drawing on extensive documentation about the Nechayev case, Joseph Frank succeeds in refuting this negative judgment. From hindsight, the liquidation of Shatov, the deception of common people, and the manipulation of facts can be considered a prefiguration of Stalinist terror in the 1930s. In 1990, a study appeared in Moscow that confirms this interpretation and sees *Devils* as a premonition of the political dystopia under the Soviet regime (Saraskina 1990).

In the concluding chapter Dostoevsky writes that all accomplices of the murder were soon arrested, but the murderer himself managed to go abroad and escape, just as the historical Nechayev successfully fled to Switzerland and avoided arrest for about three years. The very last pages of the novel are devoted to the enigmatic Nikolai Stavrogin. Three months after the fateful event in the park of Skvoreshniki, Darya Pavlovna, Shatov’s

sister, receives a letter from Stavrogin inviting her to join him and settle in Switzerland, where he has bought a small house. It is a strange epistle, printed in full in the novel and thus showing the contradictions it contains. In the first paragraph he asks her to go with him, but further on he writes that it would be better if she would not come. He admits taking pleasure in doing good, but at the same time wishes to do evil. He says that he will never lose his reason, but I observe no rationality in what he does or says in the novel. Physically strong, like Bazarov and Rakhmetov, Stavrogin has been described as shy, or ill, or mad, impulsively and irresponsibly courting women and taking pleasure in hurting and destroying them. He felt attracted to malicious caprice: for instance, grasping someone by the nose or biting in the ear of the provincial governor. It is Stavrogin who suggests to Peter Verkhovensky the perfidious murder of a comrade simply to achieve blind obedience and dictatorial control. The nihilist frame of mind has not only dislocated his capacity for reasoning but also his control of emotions. When Darya Pavlovna and Varvara Petrovna try to find Stavrogin, it appears that he has hanged himself in a remote building of the estate, although he had written in his letter that he would never do that.

*Devils* is a highly disturbing dystopian novel anticipating the host of anti-utopian political fiction that was to appear in the twentieth century.